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THE ETHOPOIETIC FUNCTION OF WRITING: HOW TO WRITE TO MASTER ONE'S OWN IDENTITY. ON THE BASIS OF THE LATE WORKS BY MICHEL FOUCAULT

In order to be a totally independent identity and to be able to affirm the realization of the self as a rule for everyday life we have to adopt paradoxically contrary assumptions: the assumption of the limitation and restraining of one's originally exuberant and excessive powers of the self and the assumption of the counteracting death. Hans-Georg Gadamer in his opus magnum *Truth and Method* writes that "to give oneself the universality of a profession is at the same time "to know how to limit oneself"" (Gadamer [1960] 2004, 12). On the other hand we have the famous Foucauldian words that we sing our song of identity against the imminently progressing powers of death. Hence, we are witnesses of the necessity of limiting our powers as the first condition for being a coherent and complete whole, which condition is negative in character, and necessity for counteracting oncoming death as the second one, which has the positive connotation of gathering vital strengths against death. The latter condition seems totally in contradiction with the former. Hence, we should ask ourselves how it is possible to support both these assumptions. However, to counteract death can also be understood in terms of the limitation of the originally excessive powers of satisfaction directed to the dispersion of the self.

Michel Foucault in his later works ([1994] 2000 a and b) writes about a particular way of taming the excessive powers of our selves. This particular way accounts for the process of writing, and the "excessive powers" of our selves are not only abstract possibilities of the self, but can also account for the infinite resourcefulness of language. The method of "taming" these powers (especially the powers of language) is

realized in virtue of the sole infinite ability of language to be reborn. The constant rebirth of language is possible on the condition of the strength to limit and restrain language, and on the condition of assuming an attitude of moderation. The infinite resourcefulness of language can be explained by Foucault's notion of "mirror." The Self — referencing of language is understood solely in terms of its mirroring itself in the infinite chain of surfaces and the constant introduction of new meanings into the space of reflection. The proliferation of meanings must be restrained in the process of progressing, otherwise we find ourselves trapped in the "ontology" of traces that are condemned to erosion. Which eventually means only the free play of significations, without "the thing," the signified object expressed by them. The free and unrestrained proliferation of meanings must be stopped in order to establish a trace which gains its meaning not only thanks to participating in its context, but which adds something new to the meaningful whole composed of particles of meaning. The addition of the new element to the stream of thought must not only be the result of working the accompanying meanings, but must also contribute to the change of horizon within which the given meaning is settled.

The process of the progression of meaning is — according to Foucault ([1994] 2000, 89–101) — best realized in writing. Writing defers the goal of progression which contributes to the structuring of the distance of experiencing — and allows us not to lose ourselves in the labyrinth of thought and at the same time to internalize the results of progression. Following these assumptions we are not sunk in the chaotic mass of experience making it impossible to learn from it; on the contrary, we can benefit from the separation of this stream into smaller units of thought, which brings us closer to the meaning revealed systematically in the procedure of writing. To be able to make this process clearer we can use a notion coined by Martin Heidegger in his work *Being and Time*, the notion of as-structure (Heidegger [1927] 1962, 192 cited in: Kalaga 1997, 120). This notion helps to explain the process of Auslegung — the process of the exposition of meaning and its interpretation. We can talk about die Als-Struktur when in the progression of our understanding we move from the things that are understood on the basis of staying in the relations toward other meanings to thing that is no longer understood with the help of its context or only through this context, but which becomes understood in itself as something "present," just in the form of

the as-structure: it appears to our cognitive possibilities as something, not relatively, but positively described "thing": "Anything interpreted, as something interpreted, has the 'as'-structure of its own" (Heidegger [1927] 1962, 192 cited in: Kalaga 1997, 120). The ability to be understood as something not dependent in its meaning on its context is best explained when we refer to the notion of logos — as Heidegger does ([1927] 1994, 225) when he says that "the most present, the closest, i.e. encountered as the common things, are words and the sequences of words, in which logos is expressed" ([1927] 1994, 225). Nevertheless, some authors find (Kalaga 1997, 119) that the Heideggerian as-structure is too static and does not allow the process of signification to be expressed appropriately. However, my intention here is only to indicate the way the meaning can be presented in its completeness, without the loss of its power to embrace all of its projected connotations. This intention best describes the possibility of grasping the punctual entity by recalling two procedures mentioned by Heidegger ([1927] 1994, 226) procedures responsible for the creation of a certain "presence" of meaning: the synthesis and diairesis, the power of presenting the meaning is always connected with the presentation of the phenomenon as-something, but it also disconnects, dissolves this when taken synthetically. These procedures work conjointly and only under these conditions do they let the meaning be seen as-something. Limiting oneself to the certain as-structure, to the ideas that fix the determined, punctual entity is the only way to thematize the problem and to create a satisfying narration of the self. Determining the numerous presuppositions and projections of meaning to the certain, limited in time and space, sequenced stream of thought or written texts makes the conscious formation of an identity possible.

Building an identity on the level of narratives is an aesthetic enterprise. However, as such, it is not — as commonly misunderstood — something additional that creates only the embellishing of the, more fundamental, ontological level. Aesthetics, in the sense given to it by Foucault, is more fundamental than it originally appears. I will try to envision this passage from the additional layer (as it is commonly understood) of aesthetics to the more fundamental, ontological level of ethos and ethics. To achieve this I will start with the famous Gadamerian structure of Bildung.

Building the structures of an identity is based on aesthetic

abilities, however it transcends the aesthetic dimension in a moment when the given, worked out, subjective truth of an identity becomes the ethos — the basis for its action. Hans-Georg Gadamer says ([1960] 2004, 10) that the condition for the elaboration of the individual narrative is to assimilate a given knowledge and to make it someones "flesh and blood." The process of formation of this identity is called by Gadamer the "Bildung." In Bildung the content with which we are acquainted must be completely absorbed and assimilated into the scope of our previous knowledge. The process of assimilation is realized through Horizontverschmelzung — the melting of the horizons: the new knowledge is assimilated into the horizon of the present presumptions. The new knowledge is verified through the hermeneutical circle, not just supported or discredited, and appropriated to the old (however constantly changing) system of projections. To have the process of learning explained better, we have to agree with Gadamer ([1960] 2004, 10) that "Bildung as such cannot be a goal" and that it "transcends that of the mere cultivation of given talents, from which concept it is derived. The cultivation of a talent is the development of something that is given, so that practising and cultivating it is a means to an end" (Gadamer [1960] 2004, 10). "In Bildung, by contrast, that by which and through which one is formed becomes completely one's own" (*ibid*.). For Gadamer everything what is acquired must be preserved in an identity.

The preservation of the acquired knowledge is also a crucial idea in the Foucauldian theory of the creation of an identity. The similarity of the theories of learning and acquiring new knowledge to shape one's own identity is not an accident. Both thinkers take many of their intuitions from Ancient Greek philosophy. Michel Foucault, i.e., extensively elaborates the notions originated from Seneca. The author of *The Letters to Lucilius* describes the methods of shaping one's own self through writing "hupomnēmata" that play the role of preservation of the new notions and meanings within the cultivated self.

Writing "hupomnēmata" is one of the few important elements that constitute — what Foucault calls ([1994] 2000, pp. 207–222) — the ethopoietic function of writing. The ethopoietic function of writing is a term coined by the Ancient Greeks to describe the possibility, launched by the process of writing, to transform ones own discovered truth into the ethos — the rule that governs our vita activa. In his later writings, especially the essays from the volumes on ethics and aesthetics from

1954-1984 (Foucault [1994] 2000, pp. 207–222), Foucault presents the concise, yet very detailed, methods of governing and mastering the Self; he calls them "technologies of the Self." Seneca's "hupomnēmata" are one of the exemplars presented by Foucault of how to integrate theoretical knowledge into the very "body" of the self, otherwise "it will be included into our memory but it will not enrich our mind" (Seneca 1998, 310). To realize this ethopoietic function of writing Foucault invites us to understand the value of writing as a kind of exercise.

For Foucault ([1994] 2000, 208) writing is a kind of exercise, a training for thought, for thinking; he calls it "the practise of ascesis as work not just on actions but, more precisely, on thought" ([1994] 2000, 208). Writing deals with inner impulses and understood this way appears "as a weapon in spiritual combat" (*ibid.*). The process of writing brings light to "the impulses of thought, it dispels the darkness where the enemy's plots are hatched" (Foucault [1994] 2000, 208), so, writing constitutes the sphere where nexuses of meanings difficult for direct understanding and presentation are unbound and brought to the surface of discourse, to its light, where they are distributed into different constellations of relations toward other subjects and this way the chaotic, dark mass of thought that could drive us to the limit of our possibilities in thinking is dissolved and presented in order, creating concrete, separate meanings. Following these principles we can find our way out through the struggles with the substance of thought. Writing produces the net of relations between meanings and in this way it can transform our accidental truths in ethos — the principle which governs our actions. Seneca adds here that "to write is to present itself, to be exposed to the gaze, to submit before the others our own face" (Seneca 1998, 314). The conception of writing by Seneca is visibly similar to the one presented by Foucault. Seneca writes about "writing understood as a way of gathering the effects of the reading and the focusing oneself on the own self, it is the exercise of the mind, targeted against the great malfunction of stultitia, that seems to be favoured by the reading without limits" (Seneca 1998, 308). The notion of stultitia that appears in the writings of Seneca and Foucault designates the state in which we are distracted by reading too quickly too many books and cannot focus on the most important elements and to integrate them into our body of knowledge. We can describe this experience by relating it to certain kind of mental activity, i.e.: when I write I excavate the past from the treasure

of forgetfulness. I recall it through the selection of that which is useful and helpful in the creation of my own picture of myself. Defending us from the dangers of "stultitia" Seneca wishes to convince us not to lose oneself from our area of vision, not to "loose oneself in the labyrinth of thoughts." In order to build our ethos systematically he invites us to write "hupomnēmata" — it is the establishment of the permanent points of reference and the creation of the, so called, "the past" that you can always refer to. Writing "hupomnēmata" is directed against the experience of stultitia. Stultitia is presented as the state of wasting the gifts of our mind. "Hupomnēmata" as the collection of important fragments written down in the moment of disclosure and left as support for memory, can be reactivated whenever we are in need, help in the constant exercise of thinking the process of reorganization of thoughts. These "hupomnēmata" are just the opposite of stultitia; they are the stable corpus of the most necessary rules directed toward the malfunction of stultita.

In Seneca the process of writing "hupomnēmata" contradicts the work of grammarians who have to come to know the whole corpus of a given author. He finds that in some cases it is not necessary to be acquainted with an author's whole body of knowledge in order to understand his message. In some cases it is much more reasonable to devote valuable time to an important sentence of an author than to spend hours on volumes of material irrelevant to our situation, and what follows, to the constitution of the self. Seneca, and also Foucault ([1994] 2000, 207), oppose the notion of the "work" (oeuvre) as something that can be deciphered and reconstructed on the basis of the writings of a certain author. We should not deduce the shape of "the whole" out of its particular elements, but rather to focus just on these elements and to examine their relevance to our situation. Seneca states, that (1998, 310) "from many things that [he has] read, [he] assimilates only few, only some of them." He understands them as kinds of words of wisdom that inspire the following work directed to the internalization of the results of reading. Seneca reminds us here about the metaphor of the bee that has to take the results of its work to the hive to work them through. Another metaphor describes the food that has to be digested, Seneca writes: "so we should similarly deal with this what nourishes our mind: whatever we have assimilated, we should not allow it to be untouched and alien to us. We have to digest it. Otherwise it will be included into

our memory, but it will not enrich our mind" (Seneca 1998, 310–311). Seneca writes that

> the role of writing accounts to the creation, together with this what is the result of our reading, the certain "corpus." This "corpus" should be understood as a body of this one, who writing down the results of his reading, have assimilated them, and have made their truth his own truth: the writing transforms the thing that is perceived or heard in the " flesh and blood." It becomes in the writing person the basis for the rational thinking. (Seneca 1998, 310–311)

Foucault's analysis brings to mind similar views when talking about the appearance of an identity. The identity is just this "corpus," this "body" that becomes the effect of the assimilation of certain truths: first, the truths being read, and later integrated into the area of the self created in the systematic process of the government of the self. Hard, full of obstacles this way of creating the self can be achieved through methods proposed by Seneca and Foucault, in which both writers emphasize the importance of the process of writing in this formation. We should understand that what is here at stake is not only the surface layer added to intensify the aesthetic impressions in the encounter with the being of an identity, but something more elementary. The self is not able to express itself and what is inherently connected with it — to understand itself — without the ability achieved through the launching of the powers to present his/her story, to narrate it. It is usually connected with the understanding of some concrete problem. On the narration concerned with understanding certain problems Gadamer writes that the identity understands itself only through the understanding of a certain problem, and the other way round: the problem of understanding is ultimately self-understanding:

> The person who "understands" a text (or even a law) has not only projected himself understandingly toward a meaning — in the effort of understanding — but the accomplished understanding constitutes a state of new intellectual freedom. It implies the general possibility of interpreting [...]. (Gadamer [1960] 2004, 251)

Another quotation confirms this presupposition: "[...] that a person who understands, understands himself (sich versteht), projecting himself upon his possibilities" (Gadamer [1960] 2004, 251). Heidegger seems to

support this thesis in his statement on the structure of the exposition of the meaning ([1927] 1994, 225) which always deals with logos: with the unity of meaning.

What is also important in appreciating the value of writing according to Foucault is that he presents writing as something not devoted only to some privileged, genius "personas." Rather, he presents it as a kind of technique available to everyone, the only condition being "obliging oneself to write": everybody can simply make an arrangement and plan to improve his/her life, to try to make it better in many dimensions: moral, ethical, sexual, intellectual, emotional, by simply offering oneself to systematic analysis, by devoting oneself to thinking and writing the results down, to being aware of the unexpected gaze that can assess and criticise one's own views, one's own thinking. This whole undertaking Foucault proposes for deciding what he calls the aesthetics of existence; and it is really the aesthetics — writing — that can and really often does transform into an ethics of an identity or politics based on the notion of strategic relations of power within selves.

Foucault's tentative definitions of writing also embrace writing as something in "relationship of complementarity with reclusion" ([1994] 2000, 207). "[I]t palliates the dangers of solitude; it offers what one has done or thought to a possible gaze; the fact of obliging oneself to write plays the role of a companion by giving rise to the fear of disapproval and to shame" (*ibid*.). "The fear of disapproval and (...) shame" is the driving force behind the institution of human, individual morality. We can control and discipline ourselves by the appliance of many different tools, one being the consciousness of the eye that is always looking at us and which evaluates our actions. Some of these constraining tools have a shameful history such as the famous Foucauldian disciplinary machines such as the panopticon that are based on the disciplining powers of the looking eye and about which the author of *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* ([1975] 1991) writes very often.

However, writing is one of the positive instruments that bring only benefits. Foucault does not divagates about the possibility of our moral dispositions to incite us to behave properly, because we have "the moral law in us." He writes simply that sometimes the incentive is not as important as the result of its implementing. "Possible gaze" that controls our behaviour is the mild support to invite us to work morally. In the article *Self Writing* he finds ([1994] 2000, 207) that writing "offers what

one has done or thought to a possible gaze" so it can control and discipline what has not been done yet, it is the reward mechanism that works in advance and reacts to this what is still only in projection. This way even the mildest, the most evasive causes are caught in the contrastive substance of ink and can be avoided in reality. Writing is the presenting oneself just to this "possible gaze" and hence its powers to create our identity in the processes of accepting our limitations in the net of dependencies indicated by Others.

Interesting is Foucault's position on the role tradition plays in the formation of the self. His constant references to Ancient Greek philosophers, especially Seneca, are considerable. This homage is Nietzschean in character, rather than Heideggerian — as Gilles Deleuze emphasizes in his *Negotiations* ([1990] 2007, 121). Deleuze (*ibid.*) explains that Greeks noticed "the relations of power between free people that rule other free people. Since then it is not enough for this power to influence other powers (...). It must also have an effect on itself." These expressions are connected with traditional Greek attitude toward the formation of the self which amounts to the promotion of self-mastery; the given person may rule other people only on the condition that she/he is first in control of oneself. For Foucault ([1994] 2000, 207–222) this self-control, this self-mastery is above all the creation of an identity, an active, continuous strive to project own possibilities and to stimulate one's own integrating powers. However, it is worth indicating that the creation of self-identity is not treated in a sense Plato gave to it. Charles Taylor ([1989] 2010, 115) explains that for Plato „to be master of oneself is to have the higher part of the soul rule over the lower, which means reason over the desires." Certainly, it cannot be confirmed that Foucault gave the priority to reason over the irrational moments in human life. He found this what is irrational in the formation of the self equally important as the rational moments. Foucault examined the limits of reason in the experiences of transgression and indicated that "anthropological thought since Kant, could only designate [them] from afar" (Miller 1993, 143) and could not systematically account for this area present in human thinking. Hence Foucault's criticism toward Plato's understanding of self-mastery, promoting rational part of human self and forgetting its irrational elements.

For Foucault tradition plays an important role in the formation of the self, what is visible also in his unique attitude toward this tradition.

He examines different historical formations (such as formations described in *Discipline and Punish* [1975] 1991 or *The Order of Things* [1966] 2002) in which different forms of individuations were taken under scrutiny. Individuations may have the shape of an identity, or may be realized without the subject; they can be e.g. the kinds of events. This confirms that Foucault did not favour the one, human, personal individuation. He accepted different historical forms of it. His specific attitude toward the history of the self is that he never tried to reappropriate the past to the present, but rather let the history speak for itself. It is visible in his attempts when he presents many different, historical accounts of self-creations and other individuations.

Nevertheless, to build an identity means to constantly create it. This borrowing from Nietzsche corroborates Foucault's position on the role of tradition in the formation of the self: he appreciates this tradition and admits his liabilities to it. In his philosophy he reactivates old theories and brings to the surface of discourse different historical formations in which self was presented in varied contexts. Different epochs have different views with regard to the problem of the self: sometimes the main idea is self-mastery, sometimes the repression of sexuality, however, Foucault ([1975] 1991, [1966] 2002) tries to render all these differences and help them to speak for themselves. The history of systems of thought embraced also different accounts of the formation, or the forgetting, of the self.

Foucault is the proponent of the view that we are thrown into constant strive. "Essential affinity between death, endless striving, and the self-representation of language" (Foucault [1994] 2000, 90) results in a growing space where the initial consciousness and identity can appear. Our identity takes shape and realizes itself in the space that opens in the confrontation with death. Nobody can win this confrontation, but introducing words, meanings into the virtual space between present consciousness and future unconscious increases the distance between "I" and death. This conscious distance, this distance of consciousness is the only barrier between this which exists and that which does not exist — between life and death. Foucault says here ([1994] 2000, 89) that we write, we speak "so as not to die." Writing helps us to save vigilance and be alert, be able to rule ourselves and remain masters of our bodies and minds. The government of the self is the answer to the obligation of taking responsibility for this which we

find ourselves already responsible for. We cannot escape this responsibility. So the only solution to make life satisfactory or simply tolerable is to exercise ourselves not only physically — today realized scrupulously and conscientiously — but to exercise our ability to think, using writing as one of the most basic and most easily accessible methods. The ethopoietic function of writing is a function very often overlooked. However, this is probably its most crucial function, because, since with the advent of the linguistic turn, it is language that is the gate through which we enter into the world of thought, often left disorganized and untouched on the huge heap of waste that constitutes the foundations of our personality. Careful attention given to thought is what Foucault proposes. His aim is not to search for revelatory truths deeply hidden in us, but rather for simple instructions. Foucault tries to convince us that going down the self-interiorizing path of our consciousness is not the answer for troubles with our identities. The answer is the limited, concise set of principles for guiding our life that are always at hand and which we can be reminded of whenever we find ourselves in danger.

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ABSTRACT

THE ETHOPOIETIC FUNCTION OF WRITING: HOW TO WRITE TO MASTER ONE'S OWN IDENTITY. ON THE BASIS OF THE LATE WORKS BY MICHEL FOUCAULT

The *ethopoietic* function of writing is a term used to describe the possibility launched by the process of writing to transform theoretical truths into *ethos* — the rule that governs our *vita activa*. In his writings Foucault presents the concise, yet detailed, methods of governing and mastering the Self. Seneca's *hupomnēmata* are an example of how to integrate theoretical knowledge into the very "body" of the Self. Introducing words into the virtual space between present consciousness and future unconsciousness increases the distance between "I" and death; hence, Foucault concludes that "we write so as not to die." "Essential affinity between death, endless striving and the self-representation of language" is, in this sense, the condition for the creation of an identity. I would like to present the ways in which Foucault assimilates all these paths to make the aesthetics and ethics of our existence coherent and complete.